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MEDEA IN THE RELIGION AND MYTHOLOGY OF ANCIENT ITALIC PEOPLES

The popularity of Greek mythology spread to the Apennines in the 8th-7th centuries B.C.

Scholars attribute this fact to the establishment of the first Greek colony by Euboeans on the opposite side of the island of Schia.¹ The population of Pithecusa started intensive economic, trade and cultural relations with the peoples of Italy.

Owing to these relations, Greek artifacts, lavishly decorated with mythological plots, very soon became the items for daily use among the population of the Apennines.

At first, as numerously attested by studies², having no idea about the contents of the Hellenic myths, the Italic peoples tried to simply copy in their workshops the plots depicted on the Greek artifacts.

Later, when the plots started to be perceived with the help of oral traditions as well as written sources, the processes of adoption started – the characters of Greek plots were replaced with the heroes, cults and deities of local myths.

At the following stage, the mythological characters, sometimes ‘interpreted’ locally, transferred from art to religion and cult.

As an example, we can refer to one particular character of Greek mythology, Heracles. He initially entered the Etruscan world through tra-

¹ A. G. Garbini, *Lingua etrusca e aritmetica*, La parola del Passato, CLXIV, 1975, 32.

² G. Camporeale, *La Mitologia Figurata nella cultura Etrusca Arcaica*, Secondo Congresso Internazionale Etrusco, 26. V-2. VI, 1985, ATTI, vol. I, 1989, 905-924; Cesare Letta, *Contatti dei Marsi con la Campania greco – etrusca; miti grecizzanti in: I Marsi e il Fucino nell' Antichità*; Milano, 1972, 52-59; L. B. Van der Meer, *Interpretatio Etrusca, Greek Myths on Etruscan Mirrors*, Amsterdam, 1995.

ditional plots.³ A vase painting presents the ‘Etruscanized’ Heracle fighting with the Nemean Hydra, the lion, pythons and Achelous. Later, Heracles is the character of myth unknown to the Greek tradition – Heracle abducts an unknown woman called Munthukh. In another case, Uni, the goddess of heaven, breastfeeds grow-up bearded Heracles. Finally, Etruscan Heracle moves to the sphere of cult service – his name is recorded in Segment #27 of the bronze model of the liver of Piacenza.⁴ Besides, there are a number of temples built in his honour on the territory of Italy.

Like the Etruscans, the Hercules of the Latins too has certain peculiarities although the image is rooted in Greek mythology. Namely:

Unlike Heracles, Hercules belongs to the sphere of cult rather than mythology;

Roman celebrations in honour of Hercules are characterized by many vernacular elements. In particular, Hercules had special priests, *Salii*, similarly to Mars;⁵

The cult service of Hercules was a mystery. For example, Cicero mentions certain Caecus in ‘Questions Debated at Tusculum’, a censor, who went blind because he gave away the secrets of the cult-service in honour of Hercules.⁶

According to Porphyry, women were not admitted to the celebrations in honour of Hercules and they were strictly forbidden to mention Hercules’ name when making an oath.⁷

Remarkably, in the mythology and religion of ancient Italy, such an honour was granted only to, so to say, distinguished characters. One of them was Medea from the Argonaut legend.

It should be mentioned from the very start that unlike other cycles of Hellenic myths, this legend became popular in the Apennines in the pre-Roman period.

The Etruscans, the first among the Italic peoples to establish close contacts with Greek colonists, were already familiar with the Argonaut legend in the early archaic period.

For example, the Villa Julia collection includes an Etruscan bucchero olpe (110976) dated back to the 3rd quarter of the 7th century B.C. Several mythological plots are depicted on the vessel. Interestingly, scholars argue that one of them represents a magic ritual of healing a youth performed by

³ About the issue see E. Kobakhidze, ‘Italian’ Heracles, *Logos, The Annual Journal in Greek and Roman Studies*, 2, Tbilisi, 2004, 174-181 (in Georgian).

⁴ G. Colonna, *A proposito degli dei del fegato di Piacenza*, SE, 1993, 245.

⁵ Serv., *Verg., Aen.*, VII, 285; Ovid, *Fasti*, III, 12, 7.

⁶ Cicero, V, 112.

⁷ P. Porphy., II, 6, 12.

Medea. The identity of the figure on the olpe with the daughter of Aeetes is attested by an Etruscan inscription – *Metaia* – it is a female figure with a long mantle and a scepter.⁸

Although some scholars discern Medea's image on the earlier Etruscan artifacts⁹, the assumption has even more opponents.¹⁰ Anyway, one thing is doubtless: before the period of the so-called literary treatment of Medea, the character functioned in the tradition as a woman skilled in magic and sorcery.

Importantly, along with featuring Medea, the artifacts present as well particular cases of the local interpretation of the myth.

For example, the following image is engraved on one Etruscan mirror from Chiusi: Certain Chaluchasu strangles Kasutru and Pulutuke (Castor and Pollux). On the left stands Athena, and on the right – Turan, holding a box in her right hand and trying to touch the left leg of Chaluchasu.

Disputes over the plot depicted on the mirror, dated approximately to 330 B.C., go on even at present.

I find Van der Meer's interpretation more convincing.¹¹

According to the scholar, the scene features one of the episodes from the Argonaut legend. In particular, it is commonly known that the Greek sailors encountered on Crete a bronze giant Talos, who guarded the island from undesirable guests. Unbeatable Talos had a weak point, like Achilles. Medea managed to drive the monster mad and ruin him by a spell.

It is noteworthy that Medea is not depicted on the Etruscan mirror. She is replaced with Turan. Turan, the deity giving natural energy,¹² who later assimilated with Aphrodite, is obviously performing a certain ritual.

Van Der Meer provides the following explanation for this substitution. According to him, the local craftsman must have made a mistake – he misunderstood the scene depicted on one of the Attic vases, which must have featured Medea killing Talos, and Aphrodite and Eros watching the scene.

This interpretation sounds erroneous due to the following facts:

Aphrodite from the Attic vase is merely present at the scene; she does not perform the magic ritual;

The Attic vessel does not feature Athena at all.

⁸ In this connection, see N. Lortkipanidze, *The Reflection of the Argonaut Myth in Early Greek Culture*, TSU, Tbilisi, 2004, 17ff. (in Georgian).

⁹ E. Simon, *Griechische Sagen in der frühen etruskischen Kunst*, 1964.

¹⁰ G. Camporeale, 1989.

¹¹ L. B. Van Der Meer, *Interpretatio Etrusca, Greek Myths on Etruscan Mirrors*, Amsterdam, 1995, 164.

¹² About the functions of Turan, see E. Kobakhidze, *Turan the Etruscan God of Love? Mneme*, Tbilisi, 2000, 127-133 (in Georgian).

Is it possible to draw etymological parallels between the names Chaluchasu and Talos?¹³

In my opinion, the scene pictures an Etruscan mythological plot with Turan and a certain Chaluchasu.

Evidently, a local craftsman somehow associated the well-known episode from the Argonaut legend with the local mythological plot and found it quite natural to include Turan in it.

Etruscan culture lacks the third and the last stage – Medea's transfer to the sphere of religion and cult.

What accounts for this is the conservative character of Etruscan mythology. Although Etruscan beliefs abound of borrowings and innovations, they hardly penetrate the sphere of religion and cult. Besides, by the time when Greek mythology spread in Italy, Etruscan religion was already a fully developed system.

In fact, the place of Medea as the expert of sorcery and magic must have been occupied by diverse types of Tyrsenian prophetic art, incorporating phyto and zoomagic.

And finally, it must have been impossible to perceive Medea as the sun-goddess because the cult of the sun and, what is more important, of the daughter of the sun, already existed in Etruscan religion.

Recent archeological discoveries attest that the practice of worshipping the sun (Catha) and the daughter of the sun (Cavatha) was quite widespread in Etruria.

It is noteworthy that, as believed nowadays, the Etruscans considered themselves the progeny of the sun. An inscription on a mirror from Orbetello mentions the sun as 'the parent': *Cathe San*.

Some scholars even suggest that the inscription implies¹⁴ *Pater indiges – genarchv'*.

Apart from this, the image of the sun-god in the Pyrgi temple points to *Padre indiges*.¹⁵

In Pyrgi existed the cult of the divine couple, *Suri* and *Cavatha*. *Suri* is identified with Italian *Apollo* of Mount *Soracte*, the god of the underground thermal waters, prophecy and healing.¹⁶

¹³ Some scholars associate Chaluchasu with *Kalchant* – Van der Meer, op. cit., 169.

¹⁴ G. Colonna, *A proposito degli dei del Fegato di Piacenza*, SE, LIX, 1993, 134; M. Pallottino, *Il Culto degli antenati in Etruria*, in: *Saggi di antichità*, 810-811.

¹⁵ G. Colonna, *Santuari d'Etruria*, Milano, 1985, 133.

¹⁶ G. Colonna, *Note preliminari sui culti del Santuario di Portonaccio a Veio*, *Scienze dell'Antichità, Storia, Archeologia, Antropologia*, I, 1987, 433; A. Comella, *Apollo Soranus*, *Il programma figurativo del tempio del scusato di Falerii, Ostreae*, II, 2, 19-93; 301-316.

As concerns Catha or Cavatha, she is a celestial goddess, the daughter of the sun, as indicated by Martianus Capella.¹⁷ This opinion is completely shared in our contemporary studies.¹⁸

However, it is also noteworthy that according to Dioscorides, Catha was the Etruscan name for one of the plants, which in Latin was called *oculum solis* or *millefolium*.¹⁹ Pliny wrote that the plant was later named *achilea* – the plant of Achilles.²⁰

In my opinion, it may not be accidental that after his death, Achilles married Medea (Lycophr., 174, 798).

And the Scholia of Apollonius Rhodius attest that such links were known to Ibcus as well as to Simonides of Amorgos.²¹

Apart from the Etruscans, the central character of the Argonaut legend figures in the cultures of other peoples of Italy as well.

For example, according to Pliny, the Marsians, inhabiting the central part of Italy, regarded the son of Medea (or Circe), Marsias, as their ancestor²² and identified Medea with their central goddess Angitia.²³

The Marsians attributed their relationship with Medea in ancient period to the fact that they were known as the followers of magic and as snake tamers.

In the opinion of the Marsians, the taming of snakes was especially typical of Medea as she easily defeated the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece with the help of sorcery.

Regrettably, the surviving monuments of Marsian material culture do not include even a single image of Medea, which would make it possible to verify the information from ancient records. Anyway, it is doubtless that, unlike the Etruscans, the Marsians freely ‘allow’ Medea to penetrate religion and cult, presenting her one of the central characters of their genealogical myth.

Medea, as the ‘expert’ of sorcery and magic transformations, figures in the mythological plots of other peoples of Italy, the Latins.

Roman myths mention Medea as *Bona Dea* and associate her with the names of *Picus* and *Faunus*.

This information is offered by numerous ancient sources. In particular, according to the *Fasti* of Ovid when Numa Pompilius decided to become initiated into the art of sooth-saying by lightning, he turned to *Faunus* and

¹⁷ Martianus Capella, *De Nuptiis Merc. et. Phil.*, I, 50.

¹⁸ G. Thulin, *Die Götter des Martianus Capella und der Bronzeleber von Piacenza*, Gieszen, 1906, 50.

¹⁹ V. Bertoldi, *Nomina Tusca in Dioscorido*, SE, X, 1936, 305-309

²⁰ Plin, N. H., XXV, 42.

²¹ Appolod., *Epit.*, V, 5; Apoll. Rh, IV, 814.

²² Plinius, N. H. VII, 15; G. Letta, *op. cit.*, 53-56.

²³ Servius, *Aen.*, VII, 750; Ovid, *Ars am.*, 101-102, Gellius, *fr.* 9P, Silius Italicus, VIII, 498.

Picus, famous for their knowledge of magic herbs, which they used to collect in the forest of Medea. The tinctures, which could transform a human being into a beast, were prepared according to Bona Dea's (N. B. Bona Dea – Medea) recipes.²⁴

In the *Metamorphosis*, Ovid once again indicates that in her magic, Medea used innards of wolf, which gave a human being an ability to transform.

Pliny specifies that Bona Dea prepared tinctures from peonia and natrix for women, so that they could protect themselves from Faunus.²⁵

In the *Bucolica*, Virgil calls them the herbs of Pontus, and ascribes to them a miraculous power:

Has herbas atque haec Ponto mihi lecta
 veneva ispe dedit Moeris, nascuntur plurima
 Ponto. His ego saepe lupum fieri et se condere
 silvis Moerim, saepe imis excire sepulcris ... vidi
 (*Bucolica*, VIII, 95-100)

The identification of Bona Dea with Medea in the perception of the Latins is also attested by the fact that, according to Macrobius, the temple of Bona Dea was closed for men, because Medea suffered from Jason:

‘Quidam Medeam putant, quod in eadem eius omne genus herbarum sit, ex quibus antistites dant plerumque medicinas, et quod templum eius virum introire non liceat propter iniuriam quam ab ingrato viro Iasone perplessa erat’ (I, 12-26).

So, we can say that Medea easily adapted to the mythology and religion of the Marsians and the Latins and became the analogy of Angitia and Bona Dea.

Unlike them, the Etruscans did not allow this Hellenic mythological character to penetrate the deeper layers of their religious beliefs.

In my opinion, this fact may have the following specific reasons:

By the time when the Argonaut legend appeared on the Apennines, the mythology and religion of the Marsians and the Latins were being developed, and were, consequently, open to borrowings and innovations.

Unlike the Marsians and the Latins, the Etruscan religion was a developed system by the 8th-7th centuries, and sooth-saying and magic was among its most conservative spheres.²⁶

²⁴ Ovid, *Fasti*, III, 291. Plut., *Numa*, 15.

²⁵ Plin., *N.H.* XXV, 29, XXVII, 107.

²⁶ This is testified by several ancient sources; see E. Kobakhidze, *The Etruscans in Ancient Literature*, Logos, 2007.

Besides, the place of Medea, as the daughter or the grand-daughter of the sun-god, was already 'occupied' in the Etruscan religion by Cavatha, who had strictly defined functions.

Unlike the Marsians and the Latins, Medea was evidently never regarded as a shrine for cult service. The character, transformed into Angitia and Bona Dea, was perceived by the inhabitants of Italy as the patron of sorcery and magic. In my opinion, they must have been acquainted with her story through oral tradition.

In Greece, the worshipping of the grand-daughter of Helios was prevented by the profound knowledge of other Hellenic myths (the appalling murders of Absyrtus, Pelias, Agave, and Creon) and the Euripides' literary version, where the daughter of the Colchian king does not spare her own children.